CHAPTER 4

Hashtags: #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and the Temporalities of a Meme Event

Pier Paolo Frassinelli

4.1 Introduction

There are plenty of studies on the role played by digital and social media in contemporary popular protests and social movements. There is equally plenty of divergence not only on the contribution of social media technologies to the emergence, visibility and effectiveness of the newest waves of social movements and protests, but also about how to approach the relationship between online activities and offline mobilisation. In the stereotyped version of this debate, accounts of social media–driven 'Twitter revolutions' (Shirky 2010) or 'Wiki revolutions' (Tapscott 2011) battle it out with sceptical dismissals of 'a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication' (Morozov 2010: viii). By and large, however, the discussion has moved beyond techno-deterministic explanations that celebrated or dismissed the political role of social media by focussing 'on single aspects of technology' and 'creating the impression that there are only one-sided effects' (Fuchs 2014: 202).

P. P. Frassinelli (✉)
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: pierpaolof@uj.ac.za

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Some of the most productive reassessments of the relationship between social movements and communication technologies have converged in critiquing forms of '*communicative reductionism*' that manifest themselves in an 'instrumental view of media as neutral channels', in 'the fetishization of technological novelty', and in 'the strong fascination with web-centric approaches' at the expense of a more sustained attention to social movements' diverse 'repertoires of communication' (Treré and Mattoni 2016: 290–291, emphasis in original; see also Mattoni 2013). Recent critiques of technologically determinist views of communication and social movements advocate the adoption of a more holistic perspective that points to contemporary social movements' use of a multiplicity of forms of communication and media, both old and new. This entails paying attention to the interactions between social and political actors, to social movements' communicative practices and tools, and to the spaces and infrastructures in which social movements operate (Treré and Mattoni 2016: 297–298). In this context, Emiliano Treré and Alice Mattoni underscore the need to 'provide conceptual tools capable of recognizing, understanding, and making sense of the communicative complexity that characterize contemporary social movements and protests' (2016: 301). And in a related intervention, Paolo Gerbaudo and Emiliano Treré call for a shift of emphasis to 'issues of collective identity and connected forms of expressive, rather than instrumental, communication', as well as to 'the symbolic and cultural aspect inherent in social media activism and in protest communications more generally' (2015: 865–866).

To this effect, I want to look at the political content of some of the communicative practices that defined the wave of struggles led by students and outsourced workers at South African universities in 2015 and 2016. Identified by a number of hashtags, among which the most prominent were #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, these struggles won important victories, including the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the upper campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT) in April 2015, the cancellation of planned university fee increases for 2016 and commitments from several university administrations to decolonise the curriculum and insource cleaning and other subcontracted staff within an agreed period of time.

But what of the injunction 'must fall'? What are we to make of its spreading and iterations? The phrase was first used in the hashtag #RhodesMustFall to literally call for the pulling down of the statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes at UCT. It was then appropriated by the

national #FeesMustFall movement against the planned increase of tuition fees, as well as by a range of related movements and protests, such as #OutsourcingMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall and, since the end of 2015, by the #ZumaMustFall campaign—which as we will see is not directly connected to the previous ones. Following Samantha C. Thrift, I define the proliferation of hashtags containing the injunction #MustFall as a 'meme event': a 'media event that references not only an external event, but itself becomes a reference point' (2014: 1091). The memetic character of hashtags such as #RhodesMustFall or #FeesMustFall is defined by their 'capacity to spread with extreme rapidity' and by their being 'highly conducive to processes of collective identification' (Gerbaudo 2015: 918). Conversely, their eventfulness is produced by the mobilisations, actions and movements with which these hashtags are associated, and is mediated by the press, television and other media that take up their terms and spread them.

By event here I do not refer to Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's conception of the true, epoch-making 'Event', such as Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the French revolution or the Chinese cultural revolution: that which gives rise to a universal principle demanding fidelity and hard work for the new Order (Badiou 2005: 173–261; Žižek 2014: 179–180). Rather, I name 'event' a momentary disruption in the order of knowledge and power: what Gilles Deleuze describes as 'events that can't be explained by the situations that give rise to them, or into which they lead. They appear for a moment, and it's that moment that matters' (Deleuze 1995: 176). This is what University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) lecturer Danai Mupotsa captured in an article published on the independent news website *Daily Vox* on the occasion of the first day of protest and occupation at her university: 'I was never ready for what happened at Wits yesterday, and it is not for a lack of want or longing for this event' (Mupotsa 2015).

4.2 What's in a Hashtag?

A hashtag is a sign used on the social media platform Twitter. 'Designated by a "hash" symbol (#)', it is 'a keyword assigned to information that describes a tweet and aids in searching' (Small 2011: 873). Hashtags organise discussion around trending topics or events, and the aggregation of content they produce is visible to anyone and searchable not only via Twitter but also through Internet search engines or trending sites (Small 2011: 874). When hashtags catch on and go viral they

create conversations and communities around them. They become media events. During the Arab Spring, the 2011 occupants of Tahir Square made the most of this by creating hashtags that publicised each occupation using the date on which it began: '#Apr8, #Jun28 and #Jul8' (Gerbaudo 2012: 1). During the 2015 campus struggles in South Africa, the October 6 movement—a network of students, workers and academics based in Johannesburg—became similarly identified with the #Oct6 hashtag, which it used to mobilise for its first day of action to demand the insourcing of cleaning and other services at the universities of the Witwatersrand and Johannesburg.

By focussing on hashtags, I am not suggesting that the campus struggles that erupted in South Africa in 2015 should be unilaterally interpreted as social media–driven events. Still, there is no doubt that social media played an important role in shaping the movements' communicative practices, forms and content. In an Orwellian move, in October 2015 UCT was even granted an interdict from the Western Cape High Court against the #FeesMustFall hashtag (Cowen 2015). University management was clearly afraid that the hashtag had influenced the students somehow. In fact, the highest number of tweets generated by #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, with a peak of 1.3 million over the last two weeks of October (Bosch 2016: 160), corresponded to the period of most intense political mobilisation on campuses and in the streets: the two weeks when students marched on the national parliament in Cape Town (21 October), on Luthuli House (the headquarters of the African National Congress (ANC)) in Johannesburg (22 October) and on the Union Buildings (the official seat of the South African government) in Pretoria (23 October).

Recent estimates indicate that out of a South African population of over 55 million, there are 28.56 million active Internet users, 14 million Facebook users, 8.74 YouTube users and 7.7 million Twitter users,[1] mostly through mobile phones, with a 20% growth in social media usage between 2015 and 2016 (Bosch 2016: 161). Even though it has fewer users than Facebook and YouTube, when the protests were at their peak 'Twitter was the most used social media platform' (Bosch 2016: 160). Notably, Twitter hashtags were used to name and identify the protests, and thereby translated their political and communicative content.

[1] http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm and http://www.marklives.com/radar/sa-social-media-landscape-2017/.

One view of the political function of hashtags is that they are part of a new modality of political mobilisation that has been labelled 'connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013: 2011)—a form of action based not on collective identification with a political identity, ideology or organisation, but rather on momentary and flexible individualised engagements with specific activities and protests. As Veronica Barassi underscores, 'Twitter hashtags and other social media practices create a space of convergence of multiple political singularities, and establish networks of affinity that are then enacted in the squares and the streets' (2013). This space of convergence is the site of translation of a multiplicity of political stances, demands and desires into the condensed language of hashtags that aggregate, reverberate and amplify them.

In the next two sections, I interrogate the temporalities recalled by the injunction 'must fall' as an expression of political desire: when is it that movements mobilise for material things and symbols (say, statues) to fall? What is the cultural logic of the expression of this desire? How do we explain the temporalities of the falling of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the long-dead symbol of British imperialism and racism, in 2015? Do they simply point to a rejection of the legacies of the past that continue to ensnare the present? Did the multiple iterations of the #MustFall hashtag in 2015 and 2016 simply express their explicit content (the calls for the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, fees or outsourcing to fall), or did they (however implicitly or unconsciously) also point to desires for radical political transformation expressed by the conceptual metaphor of falling and its rootedness in the history of political iconography?

4.3 The Birth of #RhodesMustFall, or the Semiotic Richness of Faeces

A statue is an embodiment of memory. Memory was central to triggering the wave of protests that swept across South African campuses in 2015 and 2016. In Fig. 4.1 the statue of British arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (5 July 1853–26 March 1902), the man who dreamt of colonising Africa from the Cape to Cairo, is being readied for its removal from the upper campus of UCT on 9 April 2015—the event that represented the most significant symbolic victory of #RhodesMustFall. Memorialised history is here a site of struggle—not so much between an official and an

Fig. 4.1 The statue of Cecil John Rhodes is readied to be removed from the upper campus of the University of Cape Town (April 2015). Image by Google

alternative version of history, but rather between memory and the normalisation of forgetting. The emergence of the #RhodesMustFall movement forced UCT management, and more broadly South African society, to openly acknowledge that the legacy of the past represented by the presence of the statue on the UCT campus is still alive in the present.

The action that triggered the series of events that culminated with the removal of the statue was led by UCT student Chumani Maxwele, who on 9 March 2015 threw human faeces at it. The faeces had been collected from the infamous bucket toilets in the township of Khayelitsha. Bringing them to UCT meant materially and symbolically crossing the racial and class divides that still separate affluent historically White suburbs such as Rondebosch, where UCT is situated, from the poorer areas of Cape Town. The action reenacted what in South Africa are known as 'poo protests', where township and informal settlement dwellers draw attention to the failures of sanitation services by throwing excrement at public buildings. As #RhodesMustFall activists explained, throwing faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was a reference to the entanglement of past and present 'realities of degradation and oppression' (#RhodesMustFall 2015).

This is the same entanglement of temporalities recalled by another intervention that anticipated the birth of the #RhodesMustFall movement: the appearance of the 'Remember Marikana' stencil at the feet of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes in May 2014, on the eve of a debate on the merits of keeping or removing the statue from UCT upper campus (Knoetze 2014). The stencil was created by the Tokolos Stencils Collective and has been spray-painted on walls, monuments and public buildings from Cape Town to Johannesburg. It represents 'the man in the green blanket', aka Mr Mgcineni 'Mambush' Noki, one of the thirty-four mineworkers who were killed by the South African police during the Marikana massacre on 16 August 2012 (see Frassinelli 2017). The stencil has been described by the Tokolos Stencils Collective as a 'catalyst for the recovery of historical memory of the recent past': an artistic intervention that uses 'Marikana to champion movements that aspire to rid our country of colonialism and white privilege once and for all' (Kagablog 2014). There is a rich intertextuality created by the appearance of the stencil of the man in the green blanket on the pedestal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, especially in the context of the polemics surrounding UCT's alleged financial interests in Lonmin, the mining company whose employees were massacred in Marikana (African News Agency 2015). Rhodes was one of the founders of the De Beers mining company, and his statue was thus a reminder of the long colonial and neo-colonial history of extractive capitalism on the African continent. As Joseph Mathunjwa, the President of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), said in an interview following an address at UCT in August 2015: 'You must recall that when the miners were striking in 2012, they were looking to undo the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes. So, it is natural that they will support the actions of the RhodesMustFall movement' (quoted in #RhodesMustFall 2015).

Monuments become sites of conflict at moments of major political disjuncture (Mitchell 2013). The removal of Rhodes' statue from UCT was a reminder of how in South Africa time is out of joint: with the persistence of colonial structures of inequality in a post-colonial and post-apartheid society still in need to be decolonised. This is the temporal disjuncture that Nelson Maldonado-Torres and other de-colonial thinkers have named 'coloniality'—a term that 'refers to a logic, metaphysics, ontology, and a matrix of power that can continue existing after formal independence and desegregation' (Maldonado-Torres 2016: 10), which

is where the call for decolonisation comes in. As Ramón Grosfoguel underscores, '[o]ne of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of a "postcolonial world"' (Grosfoguel 2011: 14).

4.4 The Temporalities of Falling: Decolonisation versus Regime Change

Among the explanations given by the ruling ANC, by the Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande as well as by some university vice-chancellors and their academic allies for the intensity of the wave of struggles associated with the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall hashtags, there were references to 'nefarious agendas' pursued by agitators and hijackers of 'the legitimate actions and causes of students and workers' (Landsberg 2016). One of the strongest pronouncements to that effect came in a statement issued by ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe following the meeting of the organisation's National Executive Committee held on 27–28 November 2015. Among other things, the statement notes 'attempts to use genuine concerns of students for other objectives', and claims that:

> Early signs of counter-revolution were identified as follows:
>
> • Targeting the state and state institutions, particularly the attempt to storm Parliament and Union Buildings when the government was amenable to engagement.
>
> • Slogans about regime change when issues were being addressed. (Mantashe 2015)

Insofar as it was genuine, fear of regime change seems to have been rooted both in the memory of the Arab Spring—Mantashe's statement refers to 'the broader threats of counter-revolution […] witnessed in other countries' (Mantashe 2015)—and arguably in the political iconography associated with the conceptual metaphor of falling. References to regime change, a third force, or the influence of ultra-leftists and anarchists are also part of the ANC's repertoire of discursive responses to popular mobilisations that have laid the ground for the increasing securitisation of the South African state (Duncan 2014; McKinley 2017: 100–118). It turned

out, however, that even in this instance 'regime change' was less part of the discourses and practices of the protest movements than of the political unconscious of an increasingly insecure, divided and paranoid ruling party—Mantashe's statement also mentions the need 'to restore order and stability' within the ANC ranks (Mantashe 2015).

Differently from other protests and social movements with an anti-political establishment identity and no party-political affiliations, such as Occupy Wall Street or the Indignados in Spain, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements had to negotiate multiple political allegiances.[2] Some of the leaders were identified with both movements and political parties, first and foremost the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the ANC itself. For instance, on 22 and 23 October 2015, when there were marches on the ANC headquarters in Johannesburg and the Union Buildings in Pretoria, some of the student activists at the forefront of the protests were wearing ANC-aligned South African Student Congress (SASCO) and ANC T-shirts.

I have analysed several data sets referring to the hashtags that were trending at various points during the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, and at no point do we have references to regime or government change featuring prominently, or indeed at all. I offer as an example two word clouds. The first (Fig. 4.2) refers to a data set of 3180 tweets from @RhodesMustFall, the official Twitter handle of the UCT Rhodes Must Fall collective (https://twitter.com/RhodesMustFall?lang=en). The handle was created in March 2015, when UCT students began the #RhodesMustFall campaign. The tweets captured in the spreadsheet used to generate the word cloud are from the start of the first #FeesMustFall campaign in September 2015 to October 2016.[3]

[2] I use the plural campus movements because each campus and context produced its own discourses, forms of organisation and struggles. For instance, at some of the historically Afrikaans universities, such as the University of the Free State, the University of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University, much of the focus was on the intersection between race and language. A longer discussion of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall would have to take into account and unpack the specificities of each campus struggle and movement.

[3] The tweets were originally acquired using the NCapture web browser extension developed by QSR International to capture social media content, webpages and online PDFs. The data were exported as an Excel spreadsheet, from which the word clouds were generated using the open access online software Wordle. Thanks to Dr Selina Linda Mudavanhu for making the data available to me: she sent me the Excel spreadsheets that were used to generate the word clouds.

Fig. 4.2 Word cloud referring to a data set of 3180 tweets from @RhodesMustFall

The second word cloud (Fig. 4.3) refers to a data set of 1332 tweets from the @WitsFMF handle, the official Twitter account of the University of the Witwatersrand's #WitsFeesMustFall movement (https://twitter.com/WitsFMF?lang=en). The tweets captured in the spreadsheet used to generate the word cloud are from October 2015 to November 2016.

As these word clouds indicate, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements raised issues related to students' and workers' lives on and off campus and to their ongoing struggles. These include fees and outsourcing, the call for free education, the securitisation of campuses, conflict and negotiations with university managements, solidarity with movements at other campuses and broader issues to do with race and decolonisation.

In a wide-ranging analysis of documentation mainly produced at the University of the Witwatersrand—including printed documents, social media texts, performances and songs—Gillian Godsell, Refiloe Lepere, Swankie Mafoko and Ayabonga Nase (2016) note the centrality of a small number of themes to the discourses and communication surrounding the #FeesMustFall protests. These key themes are categorised under the headings of: 'violence'; the 'shame' associated with student debt

Fig. 4.3 Word cloud referring to a data set of 1332 tweets from @WitsFMF

and the Black experience of poverty and economic exclusion; the death of 'South African rainbowism'; 'hope' that a new world is possible; and what in South Africa goes by the shorthand 'transformation'—which at South African universities is usually connected with increasing the percentage of Black academics and students, especially at historically White institutions (Godsell et al. 2016).

These themes were encapsulated and given a radical spin by the term decolonisation. Decolonisation in this context indicates the need to expand the debate about transformation to address underlying conflicts and dynamics. This includes rethinking what is taught at South African universities, as well as the role and function of the university itself in the struggle for social transformation. As writer and activist Leigh-Ann Naidoo explains, the student movements of 2015 started with the demand to remove the symbol of racism and colonialism represented by the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT, and from there expanded the meaning of decolonisation to develop a comprehensive critique of the structure of contemporary South African society:

> In 2015 students were resisting the commodification of education by calling for free, quality, decolonised education and expressing dissatisfaction with the rate and depth of change two decades after South Africa's democratisation. Youth were critiquing institutional racism and the racialised oppression that have persisted across South Africa, making it arguably the most unequal country in the world currently. (Naidoo 2016: 180)

The call for decolonisation goes beyond the 'surface-level cosmetic changes' associated with the idea of transformation. Instead, it calls 'for the deeper structural change of the university as an institution, issuing from concerns with staff demographics, Euro-centric curricula, institutional racism and other forms of oppression such as patriarchy and homophobia' (Naidoo 2016: 182–183). It is a call whose meaning inhabits temporalities that transcend the immediacy of party and institutional politics. It is inserted in the *longue durée* of the history that starts with centuries of colonial occupation, traverses the almost fifty years of institutionalised apartheid (1948–1994), and then lands us in the still incomplete transition to a society free of the inequalities and of the legacy of the structures of oppression, domination and discrimination inherited from this long history.

When the #MustFall hashtag was appropriated by the #ZumaMustFall campaign for the recall of the increasingly controversial and unpopular South African President Jacob Zuma at the end of 2015, the students, workers and academics who had been involved in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests largely shunned this new campaign. They can be heard spelling out their reservations about this initiative in Lebogang Rasethaba's documentary *The People versus the Rainbow Nation* (2016), whose penultimate section is titled 'Suspects: #ZumaMustFall'. The documentary is an attempt to chronicle the moment in South African history marked by the campus protests and especially by the student movements of 2015—a focus that problematically results in overlooking the struggles of cleaning and other campus workers to end outsourcing. Still, this limitation notwithstanding, the documentary provides a valuable map of the structure of feeling that fuelled the 2015 South African student protests. When it comes to diagnosing their relations to #ZumaMustFall, all the interviewees and commentators underscore the distance and fundamental incompatibility between this campaign and the political desires and demands that had coalesced in the movements that erupted at South African university campuses over the previous year. The

critiques of #ZumaMustFall range from pointing out how this injunction amounts to 'treating symptoms and not the real problems', to noting the difference between the 'complete dismantling of all oppressive structures' and wanting 'the head of state to fall, or a political party to fall and another one to replace it'. All the comments collated by the documentary point to a need for systemic critique and transformation not in the realm of government politics, but in the fabric of society:

> There needs to be a kind of revolution, but a revolution in the way in which the society is organised … We talk about … now … Zuma: if you remove Zuma it will fix our problems … But the problem is the structure of this country. (Rasethaba 2016)

The ruling party's inability and unwillingness to relate to the temporalities of decolonisation, as well as the university administrators who responded to university students' and workers' mobilisations by securitising their campuses,[4] are a symptom, one of many, of South Africa's current crisis.

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[4] After using private security to repress protesting students and workers (see Duncan and Frassinelli 2015; Times Live 2017), managements at institutions such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg responded to their demands by insourcing cleaning and other previously outsourced workers, renaming buildings, and organising fora, debates and panels on decolonisation.

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